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SAMUEL SWETT GREEN

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REMINISCENCES OF JOHN FISKE.[1]

MANY years ago, when sitting at the graduates' table of a well known boarding-house in Cambridge, I used to hear much talk about a promising young man who sat at the undergraduates' table in another room, who was a devoted student and at that time absorbed in the study of mythology. Persons having rooms in the house were witnesses on the piazza, in the evening, of an interchange of expressions of tender interest between that undergraduate, John Fiske, and a charming young lady who had come to Cambridge on a visit and sat at the graduates' table. That interest ripened into something deeper, and before long two happy souls were united in marriage.

In later life I became somewhat intimate with Mr. Fiske.

[1] Among articles regarding Mr. Fiske and his work which have come under my notice, the following are especially worthy of attention:

As giving estimates of him as an historian, the remarks of James Schouler, in the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, October, 1901; Albert Bushnell Hart in a portion of a paper entitled, American School of Historians, in the *International Monthly*, Vol. 2, pp. 294-322, and at length in a paper, since Mr. Fiske's death, in the same periodical, October, 1901, pp. 558-569, entitled, The Historical Service of John Fiske; Lyman Abbott, in an article entitled, John Fiske's Histories, in *The Outlook* for Nov. 16, 1901, p. 709.

As giving an estimate of the position of Mr. Fiske as a psychologist and philosopher, John Fiske as a Thinker, by Josiah Royce, in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, for July 13, 1901. This article, in a revised form, appeared as a paper in the *Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, September, 1901, pp. 23-33.

As of especial interest, John Fiske, by William D. Howells, in *Harper's Weekly*, July 20, 1901, p. 732; John Fiske, Popularizer, in the *New York Nation*, July 11, 1901, pp. 26, 27.

For sketches of Mr. Fiske's life, one by William Roscoe Thayer, in the *Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, Sept., 1901, pp. 33-38; *The Critic*, Vol. 26 (Jan.-June, 1895), an article entitled, A Well-Equipped Historian (a copy of a leaflet sent out on request by Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.); *The Bookman*, article entitled, Some Fiske Anecdotes, Sept., 1901, pp. 10, 11; *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, Vol. 24, pp. 175-178 (giving portraits of Mr. Fiske at the ages of 8 and 25 years), an article by John Graham Brooks.

For additional matter of interest, *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 88, pp. 282-284; *The Critic*, Vol. 39, pp. 117, 118, John Fiske by George L. Beer; the *Cambridge Tribune*, Aug. 3, 1901, John Fiske's Library.

He often came to Worcester, and when there was always, I believe, the guest of my brother and myself. In speaking of him, I hope not to repeat anything that has been said in print regarding him. After making one or two disconnected remarks respecting him, I wish to say a few words about a feature in the order of his studies, and glance at one of his mental traits.

Mr. Fiske's writings will always give a great deal of trouble to librarians. He was intensely interested in current events, and often alluded to them or used them in the way of illustrations. Our accomplished State librarian, Mr. C. B. Tillinghast, tells me that he spent many hours in finding out what Mr. Fiske referred to as the Texas Seed Bill.

In several of the sketches of Mr. Fiske which have appeared since his death, especial mention is made of his sweetness of disposition, geniality of manner and modesty in demeanor. I was particularly struck by his patience. When I first knew him he was tall and slender, but, as all know, he had, in later years, to carry about a ponderous weight of flesh. I have seen him as he tried to climb a hill, and walked by his side as he went up stairs, but, annoying as it was for him to do these things and difficult though it was for him to breathe, I never heard him utter a word of complaint.

I said to him once: "It is hard for you to go up stairs." He answered pleasantly, "The doctor says that no vital organ is affected, and the trouble is only that the diaphragm is too near the breathing apparatus."

Mr. Fiske's patience showed itself noticeably in conversation. The words which he used in regard to his intimate friend (my friend, too), Chauncey Wright, are applicable to him. In speaking of Mr. Wright's absolute freedom from egotism, he says: "The patient deference with which he would answer the silly remarks of stupid or conceited people was as extraordinary as the untiring interest with

which he would seek to make things plain to the least cultivated intelligence. This kind of patient interest, joined with his sweetness of disposition and winning simplicity of manner, made him a great favorite with children."[1]

A recent writer[2] states that in his opinion Mr. Fiske would never have entered the field of history if it had not been necessary for him to earn a living. A gentleman who has been constantly in close contact with him tells me that that is his belief also. On the other hand, Mr. Fiske told me, in answer to a question as to how it came about that he developed such an interest in the philosophy of Herbert Spencer, that he studied the philosophy of evolution in order that he might understand history. Whatever the fact may be, however, it is very evident that his profound and comprehensive knowledge of the principles of evolution and their applications in the fields of natural history, the science of man, sociology and other divisions of knowledge, greatly enriched his historical work.

It has been truly said of Hume and Robertson that in their historical writings they have given us only "graceful summaries of superficial knowledge."[3] This never can be said of Mr. Fiske.

Our late associate, Justin Winsor, told me that when Mr. Fiske became interested in some period of American history it was his custom to ask him to send to him the best books which treated debated questions from different points of view. Mr. Fiske certainly reproduced the contents of these and other works in a clear and very charming narrative. His judgments regarding matters in controversy were also very sensible. This was not all, however. He had besides a remarkable insight into the connection between events. While not predominantly a historian of

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[1] Darwinism and other essays (1885), p. 108.

[2] George L. Beer, *The Critic*, Vol. 39, p. 118.

[3] See Leslie Stephen's English Thought in the 18th Century, V. 1, p. 378.

the "great forces of history" he always had in mind "the continuity" of the events which gives to our history "a real unity." Although preëminent in the exposition of military and political events, in everything which he wrote about American history, he had a consciousness of the idea of development and of the principles which underlie the movements of events and the growth of institutions in our country.

I should not for a moment think of comparing Mr. Fiske with the great historian Gibbon in respect to capacity for research or the habit of making use of primitive sources of information, but in regard to the quality of which I am speaking he was the superior of Gibbon.

I agree with our distinguished associate, Leslie Stephen, that the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is a "monumental work, not yet, if it ever will be, superseded. . . . . Whatever its faults," it "remains as the first great triumph of a genuine historical method."[1] I also agree with Mr. Stephen when he says that while Gibbon gives us "an admirable summary of the bare facts of history . . . . . he is everywhere conspicuously deficient in that sympathetic power which enables an imaginative writer to breathe life into the dead bones of the past." . . . . He is "a skilful anatomical demonstrator of the dead framework of society," but "an utterly incompetent observer of its living development."[2]

Mr. Howells, in some charming reminiscences[3] which he printed soon after Mr. Fiske's death, speaks of him as a philosopher; he seems, however, to hesitate to call him a prophet.

To my mind he was preëminently a prophet, using that word in the sense in which it is used by Jeremy Taylor in his powerful discourse on Prophesying, or preaching.

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[1] English Thought, *etc.*, Vol. 1, p. 446.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 447.
[3] *Harper's Weekly*, July 20, 1901, p. 732.

He was religious in boyhood, he certainly was a man of faith in later life. One who knew him well tells me that there was a period in middle life when his trust in intuitions was somewhat feeble, although it returned to him later. This, it seems to me, is the impression which the reader gets from some of Mr. Fiske's earlier essays. Whether correct or not, it is evident that he was a firm believer in the latter portion of his life. It was during his later years that I became best acquainted with him, and then he trusted largely to feeling in forming convictions.

Professor Royce,[1] it seems to me, has given an admirable analysis of his philosophical position. He has stated it himself in the introduction to his volume of essays, "Through Nature to God." In speaking of conversations which he had with Huxley in his earlier years, he says that he was conscious that while they generally agreed in their ways of looking at things, there was a difference. He himself, he says, valued, as Huxley did not, a source of information to which Tennyson refers in the lines:

> "Who forged that other influence,
> That heat of inward evidence,
> By which he doubts against the sense?"[2]

Mr. Fiske was always so genial and serene and so oblivious of the burdens and sorrows which a large portion of mankind feel so keenly, that I cannot think of him otherwise than as a man of faith.

I take pleasure in remembering that Mr. Fiske told me that it was in consequence of a profound talk upon the subject of immortality which we had in my brother's parlor, that he selected that topic for a lecture which he had agreed soon to give before a society of ladies in Boston. The address was afterwards printed as the first of his little publications on religious philosophy, and is known as the Destiny of Man.

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[1] *Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, Sept., 1901.

[2] Through Nature to God [1899], p. vii.

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I remember hearing Mr. Fiske deliver as a sermon in the pulpit of a church in New Bedford, on a Sunday morning, during the summer vacation of its pastor, a portion of the first of the essays in Through Nature to God. He liked to do this kind of thing, and on several occasions appeared in pulpits on Sunday.

I am far from thinking that Mr. Fiske has said the final word in religious philosophy. After men have learned all that science has to teach on this subject they turn to a border-land of knowledge, and find a source of information in faculties which belong to the mind at its existing stage of development, as the result of human evolution. In treading upon this field we stand on dangerous ground. While from the intuitions of the race we get glimpses of truth, the truth obtained from this source is mingled with a great deal of error.

It is the opinion of the best thinkers, I believe, that Mr. Fiske relied more confidently upon the deliverances of "common sense," or the "practical reason," than he was justified in doing in the present state of knowledge.

Still I must remember that his clear and devout expositions of religious philosophy have afforded great solace and support to the great body of the more thoughtful persons who still find a congenial home within the borders of the more advanced branches of the Christian Church. For one I heartily rejoice that this is so.

Mr. Fiske told me that he desired very much to write a life of Jesus. He said the same thing to the late Mrs. Martha Le Baron Goddard. I wish he had done so; it would, I am sure, have been a glorious work.

In 1870 Mr. Fiske printed in the curious little book which I hold in my hand called The Modern Thinker two essays entitled, The Jesus of History and The Christ of Dogma. These essays were afterwards reprinted in a well known volume entitled, The Unseen World and Other Essays.

In a note to the first of them in that volume he says that he intends to write a "work on 'Jesus of Nazareth and the Founding of Christianity,'" of which these essays "must be regarded as furnishing only a few introductory hints."[1]

I read these papers carefully when they first appeared. I have read them again recently. They embody, in the main, the results of the researches of the great German scholar, Ferdinand Christian Baur and those of the celebrated David Friedrich Strauss, as they appear in his "New Life of Jesus." Modifications of the teachings of these great scholars would have to be entertained today. It is very noticeable, however, that they still have a powerful influence in shaping the conclusions of the best writers and scholars today.

It is interesting to see, for example, how widespread is the adoption and constant use of Baur's fundamental "*Tendenz* Theory." But much has been added, since his time, to our knowledge of the dates of the New Testament books and the relative order in which they were written. With what joyous enthusiasm Mr. Fiske would have absorbed this additional knowledge and brought his information up to date!

To turn again to Gibbon, I presume that we all believe that the arguments in his two celebrated chapters on the rise of Christianity are conclusive as against the proofs of supernaturalism as stated by Paley and writers of his school. But he seems to have been wholly incapable of fathoming the real causes that led to the acceptableness of Christianity in the heathen world. That cold man, without enthusiasm, lacking in imagination, with only the dimmest consciousness of the part played by development in the movements of history, could not realize the attitude of the people in the Roman Empire as, having lost their gods, they stood "groaning and travailing in spirit, waiting for the revealing of the Sons of God"; nor could he

[1] Edition of 1899, p. 66.

appreciate the power which lay in the life of Jesus and in the simple but deep teachings of the gospels, when stripped of the *impedimenta* of the law by Paul and formulated in the terms of the Greek philosophy prevalent in the civilized world; he could not appreciate, I say, the power of these truths, when embodied as they were in the life of early Christian brotherhoods, to give needed comfort and support to the longing and hungry souls of the heathen world.

Had Mr. Fiske written a life of Jesus it would have had the picturesqueness and interest of the remarkable *Vie de Jésus* of Ernest Renan and, without the blemish of his sentimentality, would have represented a much higher standard of scholarship.

In writing of the sad death of Buckle at Damascus Mr. Fiske says, "as a fresh instance . . . . . of how the world passes away from us while yet we are stammering over the alphabet of its mysteries, there is something infinitely pathetic in the cry which went up from the exhausted and fever-stricken traveller: 'My book, my book! I never shall finish my book!'"[1]

Mr. Fiske, also, left his history unfinished. Had he been conscious that he was near his end when he died, he, too, would have had regrets on that account, but whatever sorrow he might have felt, I am sure that he would have passed away in the cheerful serenity which marked his life.

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[1] Darwinism and Other Essays (1895), pp. 211, 212.

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